



# Department of Pacific Affairs

## Growing Academic Interest in the Pacific — Pacific Research Centres in China

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China's diplomatic activities in the Pacific, which include President Xi Jinping's visit to Papua New Guinea (PNG) in November 2018 and the third China–Pacific Islands Countries (PICs) Economic Development and Cooperation Forum held in Samoa in October 2019, have received substantial attention in Australia. In stark contrast, China's fast-growing academic interest in the Pacific is scarcely discussed. This In Brief introduces the main Pacific research centres in China and offers a new angle to understand China's diplomacy towards the region.<sup>1</sup>

The first research institute to be established in China to cover PICs was the Centre for Australian, New Zealand and South Pacific Studies, set up by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1994 to boost China's knowledge of the region after its admission to APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in 1991. Stimulated by the Chinese government's ambitious programs to establish 200 [area and country studies centres](#) and cultivate Chinese [think tanks](#) to support policymaking, another six Pacific research centres have been set up by Chinese universities since 2012 — telling evidence that the pursuit of Pacific Studies in China is largely driven by government policies.

The six new centres have been established under different models. The first model applies to Sun Yat-sen University, located in Guangzhou, and Peking University. At the invitation of China's Ministry of Education, Sun Yat-sen University established the Centre for Oceania Studies in May 2012, which is China's first area and country research centre specialising in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. This is a recognition of the university's research strength in Australia, the geographic proximity of Guangdong to the Pacific relative to other Chinese provinces and its strong diaspora links to PICs, especially Fiji and Samoa. Financial support from the centre's two principal backers — the ministry and the university — has fluctuated and the centre is encouraged to apply for project-based research funds. A similar model was adopted a month later when Peking University — one of the most renowned Chinese universities on humanities and social sciences research — set up its Centre for Oceania Studies under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. A major

difference, however, is that this centre focuses on languages and literature while the centre at Sun Yat-sen University specialises in international relations.

In September 2012, under a second model, Liaocheng University in Shandong province established the [Research Centre](#) on Pacific Island Countries. Rather than being invited by the Ministry of Education to establish the centre in the first place, Liaocheng University reported its centre to the ministry for record-keeping purposes only. Being a less well-known university in China, Liaocheng University identified Pacific Studies as a niche area that could increase its academic impact; it has adopted a whole-of-university approach in support of the centre, from how its budget is formulated to the selection of staff. With 39 staff, the centre has the largest concentration of Pacific researchers in China. In September 2018, Liaocheng University also opened the [Confucius Institute](#) at the National University of Samoa. It is also in the process of establishing an overseas education institute at the Tonga Institute of Higher Education to provide two years' initial training to Tongan and other Pacific students in agriculture, information technology and tourism management before they complete the final two years of their study at Liaocheng University.

The centre at Liaocheng University has also received considerable support from the Shandong provincial government; in 2017 it became one of the province's 10 research groups on humanities and social sciences, receiving annual funding support of RMB4.5 million (US\$650,289) for three consecutive years.<sup>2</sup> Shandong embraces Pacific Studies as a flagship program to increase the province's profile both domestically and internationally. Increasing intellectual support from academic research is also expected to enable the province to consolidate its existing links with PICs in such sectors as mining, fisheries and health. For example, Shandong Xinfu, one of China's largest aluminium producers headquartered in Liaocheng, is the contractor for the Nawailevu and Naibulu bauxite mines in Fiji.

Established in March 2017, the Research Centre for Pacific Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University is China's fifth Pacific research institute. This centre differs from the above

research-oriented centres, because it is tasked with facilitating commercial cooperation between China and PICs. The centre is a collaboration between Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and the China National Committee for Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (CNCPEC), a network devoted to promoting economic cooperation between China and countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Currently, the centre is headed by Lucy Niu from CNCPEC who worked in Tonga between 2001 and 2008 as the Chinese manager of the International Dateline Hotel. To support the Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific, the BFSU has also been entrusted by the Chinese government to [teach](#) Pacific Island languages, which is expected to start soon.

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies accommodates the sixth Pacific research centre. In June 2015, the university established the Centre for Pacific Islands Strategic Studies which has a smaller number of staff compared with the other Pacific research centres in China. Nevertheless, establishing two such centres in a single province (the other is at Sun Yat-sen University) reflects the particular attention devoted to the Pacific in Guangdong Province. At the behest of the Chinese government, Guangdong is leading China's provincial diplomacy towards the Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

In June 2017, Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University opened the Research Centre of South Pacific Island Countries, the seventh research institute on PICs in China, and reported its establishment to the Ministry of Education. The centre builds on the university's existing links to the Pacific in niche agriculture initiatives; in particular, led by Professor Lin Zhanxi, the inventor of *juncao* (fungus grass), the university has dispatched experts to teach Fijian and Papua New Guinean farmers how to grow mushrooms using chopped *juncao* instead of logs and sawdust as 'soil'. These projects were in the spotlight during President Xi Jinping's visits to [Fiji](#) and [PNG](#) in 2018.

Three of these Pacific research centres have flagship publications in Mandarin (Table 1).

**Table 1: Lead publications in Mandarin by Pacific research centres in China**

| Publisher                                    | Publication   |
|--|---|
| Centre at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences | Introductory book to PNG.<br><i>Blue Book on Australia</i> (annual year book on topics of domestic politics, economy and diplomacy) |
| Centre at Sun Yat-sen University             | <i>Blue Book on Oceania</i> (annual year book on topics of domestic politics, economy and diplomacy)                                |
| Centre at Liaocheng University               | Introductory book series on 14 PICs except PNG.<br>Quarterly <i>Pacific Island Research Bulletin</i>                                |

Source: Compiled by author

Notwithstanding its growth in China, Pacific Studies faces some notable challenges. First, a large proportion of Chinese scholars are driven by government policies (such as the promotion of area and country research centres) to conduct research on the Pacific rather than by personal intellectual interest in the first place. Second, Chinese academic research on PICs is largely policy-oriented, with scholars being granted access to government research funds and publication opportunities. The lack of first-hand experience with the Pacific and limited time on Pacific research are two further constraints on Pacific Studies in China. The majority of Chinese scholars, who come mainly from disciplines such as history, English language, literature and international relations, have not visited the Pacific often. These scholars revealed to the author during interviews between May and July 2019 that they have heavy teaching workloads in their own departments and can only allocate limited time to Pacific research. In short, although policy-driven academic research is being promoted in China, it is hindered by practical factors that will inevitably limit its scope and quality.

### Author notes

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### Endnotes

1. This paper is derived from the author's article, [Pacific Studies in China: Policies, Structure and Research](#), published in *The Journal of Pacific History* on 14 January 2020, copyright Taylor & Francis Online.
2. D. Zhang, May 2019. Interview with Chinese scholar.
3. D. Zhang, May 2019. Interview with Chinese scholar.

